

Advent 1 Mark 13:24-37

Happy New Year! It may not feel like the beginning of something but in our church calendar that is exactly where we find ourselves today, at the beginning of a new year. The lectionary will focus now on St Mark's gospel and that will bring a new pace of writing as Mark seems to speed through the life and ministry of Jesus with much urgency and excitement.

Each new church year begins with the season of advent and just as the world was during the original advent, that is the time before the birth of Christ, so we capture a glimpse of its darkness, its hope and its expectation in these 4 Sundays before Christmas. In some places advent candles are with us and they mark the time visually by bringing increased light to our darkened world. Yet even with the one candle lit today, hope is visible.

And hope is the message we are given today. The prophet Isaiah cried out to the Lord in hope having acknowledged that even the most righteous things that we do are no more than a filthy rag yet God is our father, he loves us and we can be hopeful that he will respond in love to his people even when we least deserve it. That was the hope held fast before the Christ came, and that hope was fulfilled in Jesus. Today we commemorate that and give thanks for it. But we don't end there, this is not just an exercise in looking back, it is truly an opportunity to look forward.

When we consider the world around us and indeed when we look back through history for one reason or another hope has always been vital to the human condition. But in our world today there is much fear and violence. Being a Christian in most places in the world comes with either the threat of harm or the perception of irrelevance. In some places we are hated by those who claim to follow another faith and in others we are the target of those who fundamentally refuse to accept that any faith should be practiced publicly.

Since the death and resurrection of Jesus waiting has been a part of Christianity. Just as the patriarchs of old waited for the messiah so has the church since its earliest days been waiting for Christ to come again. St Paul tells us that the people of the church in Corinth were waiting expectantly as he writes to them in his first letter to that church. Indeed Jesus himself in the gospel this morning tells us to wait.

But our waiting is not passive, not just keeping the idea of a second coming in the back of our minds but not really expecting to see it happen in our lifetimes. No, we are to be actively waiting, making preparations, expecting to see signs that the time is getting closer, ensuring all is in place so that we are not surprised or indifferent when it happens. Jesus reminds us that we know the cycle of the seasons by the behaviour of nature, and just like that he tells us that there will be signs of what is to come.

But he also confirms that this is a waiting based on hope, no one knows exactly when this will happen, not even Jesus, only the father. Yet we must stay alert and be constantly concerned with our own preparedness. And in being hopeful and expectant in our waiting, we can do so very much for the world around us. By refusing to lose hope in a fearsome world we can be inspirational to others. Don't imagine for a second that anyone elbowing their way around shopping centres as the advent season of excessive shopping begins in society is feeling fulfilled and satisfied by their experience, even if they got everything that they wanted. The religion of consumerism offers no hope, just newer things to lust after that lose their lustre very quickly. We have hope in something eternal and we can share it.

Advent is an amazing opportunity for evangelism if we will only see it. People are speaking our language at this time of year. They are preparing to celebrate Christmas and the symbols of God's incarnation are all around us. We can choose to be cynical and bemoan the commercialisation of Christmas or we can reclaim our festival and share it with those who are

curious. Be heartend when you see in shop windows and on commercial premises the occasional beautiful nativity scene, for there is a little glimpse of hope.

We are beginning to see advertising all around for various carol services and concerts which bring the gospel through the songs to so many people outside the church. There is another little glimpse of hope. Many of us welcome a large number of people in Church who are not regulars for our Christmas services. Again, we can be hopeful. All of these opportunities for encounter can fill us with hope. We can be joyful that some people will be moved to seek God this advent season one way or another. Can we who are recipients of God's grace, be so filled with hope through our own preparedness that we can share that hope with others? Surely in the Lord's strength, we can. Let us then wait for the Lord, actively, expectantly and with hope.